THE DEVIL'S DOMINION

MAGIC AND RELIGION IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Seventeenth-century New Englanders used magic to predict the future, to heal the sick, to destroy their enemies, and to defend themselves against occult attack.

Rebecca Johnson of Andover, Massachusetts, was worried about her brother, whom she feared was dead. Johnson had her daughter balance a sieve on a pair of shears and ask "if her brother Moses Haggat was alive or dead." If the sieve turned, they would know he was dead. And so it did.

Dorcas Hoar of Beverly, Massachusetts, used palmistry to divine the future. She borrowed a book on the subject from one of her neighbors, a book with "many streaks and pictures in it."

A healer in Boston provided one of his patients with a charm that he promised would cure the tooth-ache. It was apparently "a usual thing for People to cure Hurts with Spells."

Goodwife Glover, a Bostonian charged with witchcraft, admitted that she tormented her enemies by stroking rag dolls that she made to represent them. Court officials were sent to her house and returned with several of these dolls.

Henry Grey, a Connecticut farmer, was convinced that his ailing heifer had been bewitched and so flogged the beast in order to injure the person responsible. Sure enough, a neighbor whom he suspected collapsed in agony.

When Michael Smith informed some of his neighbors in Boston that he feared he was under an evil hand, they took some of Smith's urine and closed it in a bottle. A local healer immediately appeared outside the house where the "urinary experiment" was taking place and did not leave until the urine was

poured away. Those inside the house concluded that the healer had bewitched Smith.[1]

Incidents such as these seem far removed from the religious ideals that inspired the settlement of New England. Puritan ideology denounced magic as part of the corrupt and compromised world that constituted Stuart England. Puritan leaders planned to establish in the New World a society that would conform, as far as humanly possible, with their spiritual ideals: not for them the gulf between principle and practice for which they condemned so many English Protestants. Aboard the flagship *Arbella* in 1630, between England and Massachusetts Bay, governor-elect John Winthrop had delivered a lay sermon to his fellow travelers, in which he affirmed their purpose in crossing the Atlantic:

> The end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord, the comfort and increase of the body of Christ whereof we are members, that ourselves and posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world, to serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and purity of His holy ordinances.

Once cut off from the malign influence of a society in which faith was all too often perfunctory, the colonists would find themselves better able to pursue a godly life. "That," declared Winthrop, "which the most in their churches maintain as a truth in profession only, we must bring into familiar and constant practice."[2]

As it turned out, many New Englanders were less consistent in the "practice" of their faith than Winthrop had hoped. Their use of magic bears testimony to the gulf between "profession" and "practice" of religion in early New England. Historian David Hall has recently warned against "the assumption that the people of New England exemplified a total or perfect faith." A small minority of layfolk were unswerving in their commitment and became deeply

1 Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Salem Witchcraft Papers: Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak*, 3 vols. (New York, 1977), II: 507; *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, II: 398; Increase Mather, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (Boston, 1684), p. 261; Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences* (Boston, 1689), pp. 7–8; Willys Papers: Records of Trials for Witchcraft in Connecticut (Annmary Brown Memorial, Brown University Library, Providence, R.I.), W–33, 6 June 1692, testimony of Henry Grey and Ann Godfrey; Suffolk County Court Files: Original Depositions and Other Materials from the Proceedings of the Quarterly Courts of Suffolk County, Massachusetts (Massachusetts Archives, Columbia Point, Boston, Mass.), vol. 24, #1972, testimony of Hannah Weacome.

2 John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in Perry Miller, ed., *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City, N.Y., 1956), p. 82.

troubled whenever they fell short of their ideals; but the rest embodied their principles only intermittently. Hall emphasizes that such behavior did not necessarily signify "fundamental disaffection from religion." Many of those who applied their faith only sporadically nonetheless honored religious ideals; their principles were sincere, although they often neglected to judge their own behavior by the standards they espoused. These people were not cynical hypocrites; nor had they self-consciously lapsed from a commitment to active faith. Without explicitly rejecting their beliefs, they managed to set them aside from time to time.[3] In a similar vein, Laurence Veysey has suggested that New Englanders "were perfectly able to compartmentalize their thinking." Thus, they could believe quite sincerely in the doctrines and moral precepts laid down by Puritanism, and yet sometimes behave quite differently.[4] This mentality, a far cry from the rigorous consistency demanded by Puritan ministers, helps to explain the widespread currency of magical beliefs and techniques in seventeenth-century New England, despite the settlers' apparent commitment to a religious system that condemned and repudiated magic.

Before addressing in detail this split between clerical injunctions and lay practice, I should explain what I mean by two crucial terms. *Magic* and *religion* are used here to signify different ways of relating to supernatural power. Magical belief rests on the assumption that human beings can control occult forces (whether personal or impersonal) through ritual techniques. Magical skill enables people to harness supernatural power and use it for their own purposes: they can predict the future, protect themselves against harm, heal the sick, and strike down their enemies. Religious belief assumes the existence of a supernatural authority (usually personified) that controls the world in accordance with its own will; people can attempt to influence this divine power through prayer and other devotional exercises, but there is no guarantee that their desires will be fulfilled or their requests granted. Religious figures who perform miracles and prophesy do so as the instruments or conduits of divine puissance: supernatural power acts through them. Religion thus empowers the supernatural, whereas magic empowers human beings through their command of the supernatural. Religion is supplicative, magic manipulative.[5]

3 David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), especially pp. 14–17.

4 Laurence Veysey, "Intellectual History and the New Social History," in John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), p. 16.

5 For similar formulations, see William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in*

In making this clear-cut theoretical distinction between religious and magical strategies, I do not mean to suggest that the two are always treated as dichotomous or mutually exclusive. More often than not, people combine the two strategies: either they adhere to a system of beliefs that includes both magical and religious elements – usually on the grounds that divine authority does not exclude human power as a subordinate agency – or they ascribe simultaneously to two separate traditions, one magical and the other religious, switching back and forth between them as convenient. Often they do not even articulate the distinction. Most human cultures are, to use an anthropological term, *magico-religious*.[6] Yet using magic and religion as distinct analytical categories is doubly useful in the context of seventeenth-century New England. First, Puritan theology made a clear distinction between supplicative and coercive ritual; it insisted that they were incompatible and repudiated the latter. Second, these two categories of supernatural belief existed in New England culture as relatively pure types: Puritan devotional ritual was strictly supplicative, whereas the folk techniques I describe below were clearly coercive in that they were assumed to produce an automatic effect. In adopting a theoretical distinction close to that made by Puritan theologians, I do not mean to suggest that such a distinction made sense to all colonists. New Englanders cannot be divided into two opposed camps, one magical and the other religious. But a distinction can be made between colonists who restricted themselves to religious forms of behavior, in accordance with the rigorous demands of Puritan theology, and those who also used folk magic. The former may be characterized as exclusive, the latter inclusive.[7]

Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach, 3d ed. (New York, 1972), p. 413; John Middleton, ed., *Magic, Witchcraft, and Curing* (Austin, 1967), p. ix; and Melford Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism: A Study in the Explanation and Reduction of Suffering* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), p. 270.

6 When analyzing nonwestern cultures, anthropologists now try to avoid using *magic* as a separate category of belief or practice. Some use the label *magico-religious*. Others define *religion* in extremely broad terms so as to incorporate all aspects of supernatural belief. Dorothy Hammond, for example, defines religion simply as "belief in superordinate agencies" (Dorothy Hammond, "Magic: A Problem in Semantics," *American Anthropologist*, 72 [1970]: 1355). Mischa Titiev has suggested "a fresh start toward a workable dichotomy" based on the distinction between regular, or "calendrical," practices and "critical" practices used only in time of "emergency or crisis" (William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, 4th ed. [New York, 1979], pp. 335–7). As I argue below, the distinction between magic and religion remains useful for discussion of early modern western culture, especially when considering the ideas disseminated by Protestant propagandists.

7 Social anthropologists have often defined religion as group-oriented and magic as individual-oriented. According to Emile Durkheim, the former binds community members within a church, whereas the latter consists of individual rela-

When Protestant theologians in early modern England insisted that magical and religious beliefs were incompatible, they challenged attitudes and practices that were deeply embedded in English culture. Prior to the Reformation, not only had the Catholic church credited human beings with a degree of supernatural power, but English men and women had blended Christianity with traditional folk beliefs that were essentially magical. Supernatural belief and practice in medieval England was, for the most part, magico-religious. Sixteenth-century Protestant evangelists, however, rejected the notion that human beings could wield supernatural power and condemned magic as an attempt to coerce God. Protestant thinkers emphasized God's absolute sovereignty: all events in the world, they argued, were determined by God and expressed his omnipotent will; men and women should submit to divine providence. From this perspective, any attempt to manipulate the world through magical ritual exhibited a lack of proper humility. In Protestant thought, magic emerged as a category opposed to that of "true" religion; it embodied rebellion against God's will. Protestant reformers accordingly set out to purge Christianity of its magical accretions and to suppress folk magic.

That campaign is described by Keith Thomas in his monumental work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971). Thomas argues that Protestant propaganda was ultimately effective: by the end of the seventeenth century, not only had the reformist view of magic and religion as irreconcilable principles been generally accepted, but a growing number of people relinquished magical aids and turned instead to "a combination of self-help and prayer to God."[8] According to Thomas, Protestantism succeeded not only in dissociating itself from magic, but also in triumphing over it. Thomas's work has been profoundly influential, and any investigation of this subject, including my own, owes an incalculable debt to his achievement. Yet the thesis advanced by Thomas is controversial in several respects.[9] I will mention here a few of the questions raised by his

tionships between a magician and his clientele (Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* [1915; New York, 1965], pp. 59–60). At least in the case of early New England, the distinction does not seem applicable, since colonists sometimes gathered in small groups of neighbors, friends, or relatives in order to engage in magical experiments; some people sought expert assistance, but others did not. Magic certainly had no church, as Durkheim points out, and it was less formal a realm of activity than religion, but it was often enacted in a group and did unite people, whether in hope or fear.

8 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971; Middlesex, England, 1973), p. 331.

9 See especially reviews by Hildred Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 (1975): 71–89; E. P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Midland History*, 1

critics, since these will serve to clarify my own position and the ways in which it differs from that of Thomas.

Critics have accused Thomas of imposing his perception of a dichotomy between magic and religion onto early modern English culture. Thomas does recognize that the two traditions overlapped. Indeed, he gives many examples of Protestants from all levels of English society who resorted to magic.[10] Nevertheless, the rhetorical framework of his book treats magic and religion as rightfully separate and antagonistic entities. Several critics have accused Thomas of taking a perspective voiced by one segment of the population – namely, Protestant propagandists – and treating it as a generality. These critics argue that reformist propaganda was less successful than Thomas would have us believe and that the examples of overlap between magic and religion that he provides are much more representative of general attitudes than are the clear-cut categorical distinctions formulated by Protestant theologians.[11] Like Thomas, I find it useful to distinguish between magical and religious strategies, but I agree with his critics that the Protestant campaign to differentiate between magic and religion was only partially successful: by the end of the seventeenth century, some people did believe that magic and religion were incompatible; but others did not.[12] It would be perverse to attempt a historical analysis of this subject without reference to magic and religion as categories of supernatural belief; after all, some members of English society did distinguish between the two.[13] But we should view magic and re-

(1972): 41–55; and Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (New York, 1990), chap 2.

10 Thomas's interpretation is thus more nuanced than that exemplified by Robert Muchembled's *Culture populaire et culture des elites dans la France moderne* (Paris, 1978). Muchembled and a number of other French historians posit a sharp division between "elite" Christianity and "popular" folk culture; they portray the two traditions as relatively autonomous and self-contained. Stuart Clark discusses these studies in "French Historians and Early Modern Popular Culture," *Past and Present*, 100 (1983): 62–99. Nor does Thomas go so far as two of his reviewers: Lawrence Stone refers to "the official culture of Protestant Christianity" and "the counterculture of magic"; E. P. Thompson suggests the existence of a popular "anti-culture" (Lawrence Stone, "The Disenchantment of the World," *New York Review of Books*, 2 December 1971; E. P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," p. 51).

11 See especially Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, p. 23; and Hildred Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I," pp. 76–7.

12 Michael MacDonald's *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York, 1981) shows that ordinary people in early modern England continued to incorporate into their mental world a diffuse array of traditions and beliefs. This loose weave of attitudes and practices was far removed from the spirit of Protestant reformism.

13 Evangelical determination, however thwarted, to transform popular belief remains at the center of recent historical analysis. See, for example, Stuart Clark,

ligion as perspectives that may or may not be compatible, depending on the attitudes of those involved, instead of seeing them as necessarily antagonistic principles. We should also bear in mind that the distinction itself was not meaningful to all participants in early modern English culture. Changing the terms of discourse in this way enables us to recognize magic and religion as useful analytical categories without locking them into an inflexible relationship, or implying that all actors in a specific historical context treat them in a particular way.

Critics have also expressed misgivings about Thomas's claim that magical tradition was incoherent and fragmentary. Thomas recognizes "the interrelatedness of the main magical beliefs," but nevertheless sees magic as "a collection of miscellaneous recipes, not a comprehensive body of doctrine."[14] Critics believe that magic was much more integrated in its view of the world than Thomas suggests. One reviewer declares that magical belief constituted "a historically particular view of the nature of reality, a culturally unique image of the way in which the universe works, that provides a hidden conceptual foundation for all of the specific diagnoses, prescriptions, and recipes that Thomas describes."[15] I agree that magical techniques reflected an underlying mental structure, an unarticulated but nonetheless consistent view of reality. In the chapters that follow, I try to explicate that mental structure and its relationship to Protestant thought. However, I would not go so far as to characterize magical beliefs as comprehensive or systematic. There is a world of difference between a series of traditions that cohere through shared assumptions and an actual system of ideas. Magic in seventeenth-century England and New England belonged to the former, not the latter, category.[16]

"Protestant Demonology: Sin, Superstition, and Society," in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1990), especially pp. 72–4.

14 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 755 and p. 761.

15 Hildred Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I," p. 83. See also E. P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," pp 51, 52. In his response to Geertz, Thomas admits that he may have paid insufficient attention to underlying connections, but he questions, as do I, "whether magic always had the 'philosophical underpinnings' with which Geertz credits it" (Keith Thomas, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 [1975]: 104. See also Laurence Veysey, "Intellectual History and the New Social History," p. 21.)

16 A number of scholars, most notoriously Margaret Murray, have argued for an unbroken pagan tradition in medieval and early modern Europe. They claim that surviving references to magic and witchcraft can be pieced together to show the persistence of an organized pagan network, united by a coherent set of beliefs and rituals. Murray's influential book, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921), describes a pre-Christian fertility cult, centered on the worship

Historians of seventeenth-century New England have only recently begun to take an interest in magical beliefs and practices. This growing interest stems from a transformation in the way that scholars perceive religious culture in the northern colonies. Over the past thirty years, historians have distanced themselves from the model of spiritual life in early New England associated, sometimes unfairly, with the work of Perry Miller. This paradigm focused exclusively on Puritanism and portrayed New Englanders as a monolithic community of thinking men (women making only occasional appearances) characterized by their intellectual commitment and united by their notion of covenant.[17] Recent historians have criticized this model on several fronts, including its stress on intellectual over experiential content in Puritanism and its notion of a largely homogeneous New England community. These revisionists emphasize instead the importance of emotional piety within the Puritan movement and the pluralism of early New England culture. Historians now recognize that some people were much less committed than others to Congregationalist orthodoxy; that alternative faiths attracted support from a small but vocal minority of colonists; and that layfolk did not merely receive their ministers' teachings as passive vessels, but adapted those teachings according to their own needs and priorities, influencing as active participants the substance and tone of their faith.[18]

Recent discussion of magic in early New England has further broadened our perception of supernatural culture in the northern colonies, as well as shed new light on the relationship between

of a two-faced and horned god, which flourished throughout western Europe until the seventeenth century, when Christian authorities used witch trials as the instrument of a bloody campaign against the rival religion. Murray's theory has been subjected to a series of blistering attacks, most notably by Norman Cohn, who has exposed in graphic detail Murray's flagrant abuse of her sources (Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* [London, 1975], chapter 6). Most historians now dismiss the Murray thesis, although it has experienced something of a resurrection in Carlo Ginzburg's *I Benandanti* (Turin, 1966; trans. John and Anne Tedeschi as *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Baltimore, 1983).

17 See especially Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1939); *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953); and *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956).

18 The enormous body of scholarship to which I allude briefly in this paragraph is reviewed in detail by Michael McGiffert, "American Puritan Studies in the 1960s," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 27 (1970): 36–67; David D. Hall, "Understanding the Puritans," in Herbert Bass, ed., *The State of American History* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 330–49; Laura Ricard, "New England Puritan Studies in the 1970s," *Fides et Historia*, 15 (1982): 6–27; the bibliographic essay in Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York, 1986), 275–89; and David D. Hall, "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (1987): 193–229.

clerical and lay spirituality. Three scholars have considered the place magic occupied in the minds of seventeenth-century New Englanders. Richard Weisman posits a fundamental antipathy between two "competing cosmologies." He emphasizes the "rift between magic and religion" and sees "the proponents of magic" as engaged in a direct confrontation with the clergy.[19] In sharp contrast, David Hall rejects altogether the notion of two distinct traditions. Hall argues that the English men and women who settled in New England were literate, informed people of middling status who eschewed the "folk ways of thinking" which characterized European peasants. "Emigration," he tells us, "simplified the cultural system by making it more uniform." Hall emphasizes that the colonists did not abandon all folk traditions: ministers and layfolk combined formal theology with fragmentary pagan and folk beliefs in a syncretic worldview that was remarkably inclusive and tolerant. Hall also concedes that some colonists did use magic to predict the future and to protect themselves against witchcraft. But there was no "war... between magic and religion, in part because the clergy also were attracted to occult ideas... [and] relied on older lore as much as any layman." Instead, there was "an accommodation" between the two; interpretive disagreements did occur, but these took place within an overall framework of consensus.[20]

Jon Butler offers a third interpretation, which mediates between these two extremes. On the one hand, Butler treats magical beliefs as distinct from Christianity and emphasizes clerical hostility toward magical practices. On the other hand, he points out that people who used magic tended not to see their behavior as antagonistic to Christian faith. Instead, they saw the two as complementary: in order to "satisfy their spiritual needs," they turned sometimes to one, sometimes to the other. This "spiritual eclecticism" frustrated attempts by church officials on both sides of the Atlantic to secure "exclusive loyalty" from layfolk. Magic was less prevalent in early New England than across the Atlantic, Butler tells us: the strength of official opposition and the character of the initial migrant population "retarded magical practice." Even so, magic soon emerged in New England, as elsewhere in North America, giving rise to clerical concern and condemnation.[21]

The argument presented here is closest to the third of these

19 Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (Amherst, Mass., 1984), pp. 53, 54, 66.

20 David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, pp. 5–7.

21 Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 1, 10, 20, 67–8, 70–3.

approaches.[22] Magical tradition and Puritan doctrine posited two different kinds of relationship between human beings and supernatural power, but there was no fundamental breach in early New England between magical and religious constituencies. Instead, as I remarked above, New Englanders may be divided into those who eschewed magic and those who did not; some were inclusive, others exclusive. We need to distinguish between the folkloric beliefs incorporated into religious culture by clergymen and layfolk and those specific magical traditions that ministers and the more exclusivist of their flock condemned as contradicting reformed theology. For this latter group, the tolerance to which David Hall has drawn our attention operated within carefully defined parameters. But not all layfolk were that discriminating: although ministers insisted that religious faith should preclude magical practice, some of their flock thought differently. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, behaved differently. In general, those who used magic do not appear to have analyzed their actions: they did not consciously repudiate religious doctrine; nor did they try to reconcile the two patterns of belief. To use Laurence Veysey's formulation, they compartmentalized. Of course, there were exceptions: we know of one healer who believed that his magical power was a gift from God; there were doubtless others who thought along similar lines.[23] But most layfolk who practiced magic seem to have lacked the intellectual self-consciousness that prompted their ministers to contrast magical assumptions with those underlying Puritan theology; or, if they were aware that their actions were heterodox, they feigned ignorance so as to explain away their use of magical techniques, should they be challenged by a minister for their behavior. Layfolk used magic because it was embedded in their cultural heritage and because it seemed useful.[24]

22 Jon Butler's book spans three centuries of religious and cultural history. The chapter in which he discusses early American "Magic and Occultism" encompasses the northern, middle, and southern colonies; it also extends through the eighteenth century. Necessarily, therefore, Butler alludes to magical practice in seventeenth-century New England only briefly. This study explores in detail the interpretative approach suggested by his remarks; it also draws on the many insights provided by David D. Hall, whose influence on my thinking is acknowledged in footnotes throughout this book.

23 John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft* (1702; Bainbridge, N.Y., 1973), pp. 131–2.

24 David Sabean points out that whereas early modern officials and intellectuals emphasized "right belief," ordinary folk "were more apt to see belief as a kind of matrix from which different sorts of action could flow" (David Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* [New York, 1984], p. 198). I should emphasize here that I do not ascribe to a narrowly functionalist view of supernatural belief. I argue below that New Englanders turned to magic in part because it served practical ends and answered specific

The very informality of magical tradition made it easier for layfolk to accommodate magical and religious strategies. Because folk magic rested upon nothing more than a series of implicit assumptions, people could avoid possibly unsettling comparisons with Puritan doctrine and thus adhere to both, switching from one to the other as seemed appropriate. Laurence Veysey has pointed out that simultaneous adherence to two different ways of thinking becomes easier if only one is "formalized and systematic, the other a matter of broad collective mentality." So long as one set of values or beliefs remains implicit and unspoken, the potential contradictions can lie dormant.[25] Equally significant in facilitating this dual allegiance were affinities between magical belief and possible interpretations of Puritan doctrine. As David Hall has pointed out, much of clerical teaching was vague and open-ended: ministers provided a range of interpretative possibilities from which individuals could choose as they saw fit.[26] I argue below that the ambiguity of Puritan teaching on certain issues may well have encouraged layfolk to see religious faith and magical practice as compatible.

But this willingness to accommodate and harmonize was by no means universal. Not surprisingly, magical practice sometimes antagonized those colonists whose faith was more self-consciously exclusive. Magical beliefs and actions became problematic in three kinds of situation. The first was explicit condemnation of magical practice by a clergyman, whether from the pulpit or in a personal confrontation with somebody known to have used magic. The second possible scenario involved a disagreement between layfolk about the use of magic in a particular situation. Ministers were not alone in their objections to magic: some layfolk repudiated all such

psychological needs. But in doing so, I do not mean to suggest that utilitarian factors alone can explain recourse to magic. People believe because they have been raised to do so, and because their beliefs make sense of the world; both inherited tradition and cognitive value are crucial factors in the persistence of a belief. The exchange between Thomas and Geertz in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 (1975), includes a useful discussion of this subject. See especially pp. 77–9, 83–4, 98–103.

25 Laurence Veysey, "Intellectual History and the New Social History," pp. 16–17. Veysey argues that a "formal system of thought" differs from "collective mentality" in (a) its "degree of explicitness," and (b) its "self-conscious aspiration to be comprehensive or systematic in treating whatever realm of discourse it addresses" (p. 13). Also useful in this regard is Mary Douglas's notion of implicit and explicit knowledge, which Carol Karlsen applies in the context of attitudes toward women in early New England. See Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London, 1975), especially pp. ix–xxi, 3–8; and Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987), p. 154.

26 David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, especially p. 12. See also David D. Hall, "Towards a History of Popular Religion in Early New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 41 (1984), especially pp. 53–5.

practices and were not slow to criticize their neighbors and acquaintances for using magical techniques. Quarrels of this kind pitched colonists who insisted on "constant practice" of faith, in Winthrop's words, against those whose application of religious principle was more selective and intermittent, as well as against those who rejected Puritanism altogether.

The third context in which magical belief caused disharmony was at a trial for witchcraft, but here the confrontation between the two traditions was more insidious. Puritan and magical interpretations of witchcraft differed in ways that became significant when attempting to prove guilt in a court of law. Both saw witches as malevolent creatures who used occult means to harm their enemies, but where that occult power came from and how it should be proven were matters on which they diverged. Theologians believed that no human being could wield supernatural power and that witchcraft was brought about by the Devil on a witch's behalf. Magical tradition, on the other hand, endowed human beings with the ability to manipulate occult forces; it saw witchcraft as the abuse of magical skill. The laws against witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England embodied the theological view of witchcraft and demanded proof of direct contact between the accused and the Devil. Yet layfolk tended to think in magical rather than religious terms when confronted by witchcraft. Most lay New Englanders believed in the Devil and may have recognized on some abstract level that witchcraft and diabolism were connected. But in seeking to prove a witch's guilt, they focused on the suspect's malevolence and occult skill; witnesses in witchcraft cases rarely made any mention of the Devil.

The disjunction between legal conceptions of witchcraft and popular testimony about witchcraft made conviction extremely difficult. New England courts often acquitted witch suspects because there was no evidence of diabolical involvement, despite popular conviction that the testimony against the accused was sufficient to establish guilt. When a witch escaped punishment, those who had brought charges against the suspect were naturally disappointed and often extremely angry, not least of all because they feared retribution by the accused. *Witchcraft* was a multivalent term in seventeenth-century Anglo-American culture: its ambiguity enabled two different interpretations of the phenomenon to coexist for most of the time. But in the courtroom, that very flexibility became suddenly divisive, since participants in the legal process expected and yet regularly failed to communicate effectively. In this specific context, the discrepancy between magical and religious belief gave rise to tension and conflict between New Englanders.[27]

27 Recent studies of New England witchcraft by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissen-

Writing this book has been like constructing a jigsaw puzzle for which many of the pieces are missing. Evidence for magical practice in early New England is scattered and fragmentary. This is hardly surprising, since folk magic did not operate through any institutional structure that would leave behind formal records; nor were magical techniques based upon any explicit doctrine that invited or required written exposition. The people who used magic were ordinary men and women about whom we know little. For the most part, we cannot approach these layfolk directly through personal testaments such as diaries or letters. Instead, we have to use sources that mediate between the historian and ordinary people.[28]

Almost all surviving information about magic comes from two kinds of source: court records and clerical writings. If townsfolk believed that a magical expert was using his or her skill for malevolent purposes, they might decide to bring formal charges of witchcraft against the practitioner. When such accusations came before a court of law, witnesses would sometimes describe healing and divining services that had been provided by the accused; the purpose of such evidence was to prove that the suspect did indeed possess occult skills. Once removed from their negative legal context, these depositions provide valuable clues about the positive role that magic played in some people's lives. By focusing on what Clive Holmes has called the "dissonances" between lay depositions and theological prescription, we can learn much about popular belief as a distinct tradition.[29] New England court records are fairly reliable as reports of what deponents said. Lengthy testimony was often abbreviated, unfortunately for us, but the substance of testimony does not appear to have been distorted. The very fact that

baum, John Demos, and Carol Karlsen focus on witch accusations and the social tensions they expressed. These scholars identify the kinds of people who were accused of witchcraft and the processes through which they were identified as witches. They show how New Englanders used witch accusations to attack women who challenged the expectations placed on them by gender norms, neighbors and acquaintances with whom accusers had quarreled, and the members of rival factions (Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman;* John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* [New York, 1982]; Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* [Cambridge, Mass., 1974]. Richard Weisman's study of witchcraft applies sociological theories of deviance to the New England setting. It also examines the disjunction between magical and religious interpretations of witchcraft. Weisman's view of the difficulties involved in trying New England witches is similar to my own, although the overall thesis of his book runs counter to mine (Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion*).

28 For a valuable discussion of the opportunities and pitfalls presented by "oblique approaches" to popular culture, see Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp. 65–87.

29 Clive Holmes, "Popular Culture? Witches, Magistrates, and Divines in Early Modern England," in Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984), p. 94.